1**Telephone interview with Thanh Pham, former officer in the South Vietnamese Navy and commanding officer of the patrol craft rescue (PCER) HQ-14. Mr. Pham escaped from Saigon on 29 April 1975 as the city fell to the communists. Conducted by Jan K. Herman, Historian of the Navy Medical Department, 30 June 2009.**

**You were originally in the South Vietnamese Navy during the war?**

Yes. I entered the South Vietnamese Naval Academy in 1963 and graduated at the end of 1964. After that I applied to many units, including ships, and I was commanding officer of Coastal Group Number 15. That coastal group was stationed near Chu Lai Bay.

**What do you remember about April of 1975? Were you in Saigon at that time?**

No. At that time I commanded HQ-14. We belonged to the Vietnamese fleet. Our main base was at Saigon but we used to patrol depending upon how we were assigned in the zone number 1, number 2, number 3, or number 4. Zone number 1 was Danang. During that time near the end of the war beginning in 1975, my ship was patrolling very near the first zone. My ship patrolled the parallel 17. Two airplanes that I assumed were South Vietnamese attacked my ship.

**A South Vietnamese plane?**

I think so because they had operations inside the shore. My ship was outside. At that time I had been ordered to form my patrol of three or four ships. We planned to go to the 17th parallel to stop the North Vietnamese ships if they tried to move in. That was one part of an operation to support . . . . Suddenly I moved my ship away from other to support my task force. They shot a rocket at my ship.

**Do you think they mistook you for a North Vietnamese ship?**

Maybe that's a possibility but I'm not sure because at that time my ship was very close to the others. I had one man dead and 26 injured that had to be hospitalized. The last day before my ship withdrew from Danang I tried to get all my men out of the hospital because I knew that the communists were moving in. If you saw Danang city at that time, thousands of people were on the street and were trying to find a way to escape. Many people tried to get on military ships to get out of Danang. I tried to get my men out from the hospital but one man had lost his whole arm and they wouldn't release him from the hospital because his condition was so serious. When the communists moved in he tried to escape from the hospital and find a boat.

When I withdrew, I tried to take on my ship as many refugees as possible, civilian or military. I was very surprised when the man showed up and we took him on my ship. I tried to get in touch with an American ship to transfer him there so he would get medical attention.

After about two weeks after my ship had been damaged and temporarily repaired, I got orders to take the Navy families from Danang to Saigon. Some military as well as civilian but mostly civilian. They had to surrender all their weapons and then I let them get on the boat and I took them to Saigon.

From there my ship went back north to Qui Nhon. When I arrived there I saw a communist convoy moving from north to south on Route 1. At that section, Route 1 is very near the coastline. So I saw this convoy with trucks towing artillery. And there were also tanks. I pulled my ship very close to the shore and tried to shell them with our 76mm gun. I shot at them hoping I would scare them. They stopped for a while but saw that my gun had no effect at all. Because I ship was shaking a little bit, there was no way we could hit the target. So they kept moving. I then moved my ship away from there.

One of Number 1 Division ships got an order to move closer to try to destroy a bridge. If we could destroy the bridge, they couldn't move further south. A bridge is not easy to destroy. And then the communists stationed a tank near the bridge and they began to shoot back. My ship went in closer to support the attack on the bridge. I used my 40mm to cover for the other ship so he could move away from the shore.

Then I received orders from the flagship in the area for another mission. There were about 5,000 South Vietnamese troops stuck in the mountains. There was a chance they could get down to the sea and then escape by small boat. I received an order to help them.

My ship was not a landing ship so we got some small boats and even some fishing boats and we waited for nightfall. But then we had some complications. The army commander saw my signal for us to come in and pick them up. That whole night the task force was only able to pick about 150 of them. In the morning I waited too long. When I tried to move my ship in close to receive them, the communists begin shelling us. I then had to move back out. But some of the soldiers were able to get aboard my ship.

Finally I received orders to come back to Vung Tau to get supplies. The day we arrived was about the same time [Nguyen Van] Thieu tried to step down [21 April]. After we took on supplies, we sailed for Spratley Island. When we arrived HQ-2 was already there. It was a former U.S. Coast Guard ship that had been transferred to our navy.

**What type of ship was your ship, HQ-14?**

It was a PCER–patrol craft escort and rescue. The Americans used this ship during World War II. The ship was given to the South Vietnamese Navy in 1975.

**Before you sailed to Spratley Island, had you taken all the people you had rescued to Vung Tau?**

Yes. All of them left the ship at Vung Tau. We had gone to Spratley Island to protect our troops. We stayed there until the 28th or 29th of April. Our ship and other ships then took all our men from Spratley Island. We arrived at Vung Tau at noon on the 29th. We saw many merchant ships that anchored there. Many had Vietnamese civilians aboard who were trying to escape. Military persons couldn't get on those ships. They were only for civilians.

At the same time, I saw many helicopters taking people from Saigon to the ships offshore. They were flying continuously on the 29th to at least midnight. They would drop off the people then return for more.

**Did you see many American ships off Vung Tau, also?**

Yes. A lot. There were many naval ships and merchant ships.

**Did you stay at Vung Tau or go to Con Son?**

I stayed at Vung Tau until the afternoon of the 29th. I then told my crew--the officers and petty officers--that we lost the war and that I planned to steer the ship to a free country even though I couldn't disclose the location. I then said, "If any one of you wants to go with me, stand on this side. And if you don't, stand on the other side and I will try to find a means of sending you back to the shore so you can rejoin your family." I had a crew of about 115. More than 30 persons decided to go back to Vietnam.

I saw thousands of boats going out to the merchant ships at Vung Tau. I moved my ship away and then looked for a small boat that could take them ashore. It would have been too dangerous to take my ship closer to shore.

**So you say that about 35 people elected to go back to Vietnam. How many decided to stay with you?**

Maybe about 85 stayed with me.

**Were you able to put the other 35 men on smaller boats to go ashore.**

No. I couldn't find any boats to put them on. Many ships were leaving Saigon at that time. One admiral, Minh, sent me a message telling me to go to Con Son and that we would be going together to the Philippines.

**When Admiral Minh radioed and told you to meet him at Con Son Island, did you still have these 35 men who wanted to go back to Vietnam?**

Yes. Still aboard. I took them to Con Son Island and we arrived on the night of the 30th. And when I arrived there were a lot of ships. One South Vietnamese navy ship, an oiler, was used to take anyone back to Saigon who wanted to go. So I sent my men back on that ship to Vung Tau. I think that happened on the 30th.

**What did Con Son Island harbor look like at that time? It must have been full of ships.**

When we arrived there I saw many Vietnamese ships anchored. I decided not to anchor my ship after I sent my men to the oiler. So I pulled my ship out and went back in the next morning. I did that for the safety of my men.

**So that would have been the 1st of May.**

Yes.

**So you decided it wasn't a good thing to anchor. Were you afraid of North Vietnamese aircraft coming over?**

I figured it was better for my ship to not anchor and be able to maneuver. The next day I moved again. Then we received orders to go to the Philippines together.

**Did you have enough fuel, water, and food?**

I didn't get supplies. I only got food supplies one time when I went to Vung Tau. I did have a lot of rice. I saved fresh water, rice, and food. We had plenty.

**How many people were aboard your ship at this time?**

Anyone we met on the way from Vung Tau to Con Son Island, we took aboard. So we had about 300 aboard.

**Did you have any civilians aboard or just military?**

We had the military and their families. Many small boats came alongside and those people also came aboard.

**Did you take any more refugees aboard when you got to Con Son Island?**

No.

**So you left Con Son Island to start the trip over to the Philippines with just the people you had on board already.**

Yes. Compared to some of the other ships, we didn't have that many passengers. Some ships had thousands.

**Did you proceed in convoy to the Philippines?**

We formed a convoy. We took orders and followed the flagship.

**Was there more than one column of ships.**

There were many rows of ships. But we were far away from one another.

**But you could still see each other.**

Yes.

**Could you see any American ships around?**

Not originally but when we got about a half day from Con Son Island, I noticed an American ship and they gave us supplies.

I forgot to tell you a story. When I left, my family was not with me. And I didn't know where they were. I only knew that they might have found a way to leave Saigon. But I had no idea where they were. I assumed that I could get in touch with my family later. A few months before my ship began patrolling the north part of Vietnam, I talked with my wife. She told me that if we lost the war and I had to go away by myself, they would take care of themselves and we would try to meet each other later. She said that if I tried to come back to Saigon, surely the communists would put me in jail and maybe I would die there.

And I had experience with the communists. They occupied my village. And my wife and her family also had experience with communists. In 1954 they moved from the north to the south to escape from them. So I decided that if I could go back to Saigon safely I'd try to get my family.

**If I understand you correctly, you decided amongst yourselves that your wife would be responsible for escaping and meeting you later and you would go wherever and meet later on.**

Yes.

**Did you have any children at that time.**

I had one daughter who was about 15 months old and she was with my wife. It was a terrible situation. My wife's family tried to escape from Saigon but could not get out by airplane. Then my brother-in-law tried to find a way to escape and they went to the Vietnamese naval headquarters on the Saigon River. They saw many many persons already there. Luckily they met one of my friends and they were able to get in and get aboard a ship. But I was sad for my men because none of their families had escaped.

**Now that you were on your way in the convoy to the Philippines, you said you had plenty of fuel, food, and water to take care of the passengers on your ship.**

I had more than enough to take care of them.

**I understand that the South China Sea at that time was very very calm. It was calmer than anyone had ever seen it and the weather was perfect.**

Yes. But for a navy man it doesn't matter whether the sea is rough or calm. It was like a lake.

**Did any of the American ships provide you with anything or were you pretty much self-sufficient?**

We were self-sufficient but we did receive some food from an American ship. The commander aboard the flagship decided that my ship should go to the American ship, get supplies and distribute them to other ships.

**So they used your ship as a supply ship. You would go to the American ship, get supplies, and you would take them around to the other ships that were loaded with all the refugees.**

Yes. We also came alongside the flagship, HQ-3 and I was able to get my family, not just my wife and daughter, but all of them from my wife's side--19 persons--mother-in-law, father-in-law, Liem's [Bui Liem] family.

**Was the American ship the USS *Kirk*?**

Oh, sure. When my ship approached Subic Bay, the Philippine government refused to allow our ships to enter with South Vietnamese flags flying. And so the ships had to be transferred.

**The USS *Kirk* had put aboard all these Vietnamese ships, including yours, an officer and an enlisted man. On your ship it was LTJG Don Swain.**

Yes. I gave him my diary for him to write his name. He also wrote the name of the man who came with him.

**Do you remember the ceremony that took place in which the flags were exchanged?**

Did you see the picture that Liem showed on television of the ceremony?

**Do you have that picture?**

Sure. If you wish, I'll email it to you.

**Oh, yes. I'd love to have a picture.**

I'll scan it and email it to you. My email is Thanhpham2000@verizon.net. I remember very clearly the ceremony. Don Swain and the enlisted man arrived in the afternoon the day before. The next morning Don Swain and the ceremony happened later. When they were aboard, we talked and made a plan. The ceremony happened, I'm not sure but I will check my diary when I get the transcript.

**It must have been a very ceremony for you folks.**

Very, very sad. We almost cried. But no one saw tears in our eyes, only tears in our hearts. When we left Vietnam, I used to look at my ship and the flag. And I thought at the time, "This flag is not flying over South Vietnam land. Only our ship still keeps this flag and it flies freely." And now that flag was replaced by an American flag. The ship had been an American ship and now she happy to return. But we were sad because we lost our country. We lost everything.

During the ceremony we stood on the deck. And the civilians and the military, all saluted our flag and then they hoisted the American flag. Afterward, our men took off their shoulder boards and throw them into the sea. I kept mine but lost them later. When I came to America, the cap was my treasure. Another member of the Vietnamese navy borrowed my shoulder boards and lost them by accident. But I still have the flag. When I left the ship, I kept the flag and the picture of the ship. The picture was taken by the American Navy when the ship left San Francisco or San Diego to go to Saigon. And the picture hung in the ward room.

**When you all arrived in the Philippines I heard that it was also required that the Vietnamese hull numbers had to be painted over.**

After the ceremony, we had to throw all our ammunition, handguns, rifles. We had to empty our ship completely and we had to paint over the numbers. No flag, no number, no sign that it was a South Vietnamese ship.

**I heard one story when the U.S. Navy sailors came alongside in small boats with buckets of gray paint and paint rollers on long poles and they painted over the numbers. Do you remember that?**

Yes. I think that's correct.

**What happened after you arrived in Subic Bay**?

The next morning after the ceremony, I still steered my ship into Subic Bay the next morning. All of my men left the ship. A Navy

intelligence officer came aboard to ask me some questions because my ship had been at Spratley Island. They asked me what I saw there.

**What then became of you and your family?**

I left my ship. The Marines came aboard and secured the ship. And they saluted me. And then they received us, provided food, and then went aboard a merchant ship, which sailed at midnight. Then we went to Guam. My family stayed there one month. We volunteered to go to Pennsylvania, Indiantown Gap.

**Did you go by military or civilian plane?**

Civilian. We went then went by commercial plane to San Francisco.

**How long were you at Indiantown Gap?**

From the airport to Indiantown Gap, many people stood alongside the road and waved. They welcomed us to America. We arrived in the afternoon. We stayed there for three months, from June until September. They had entertainment and plenty of food. We couldn't go outside the camp but eventually we had a sponsor in Wilkes-Barre, Pennsylvania.

**Who was your sponsor?**

Our sponsor was Catholic Social Services. A woman named Denise Woodwin helped us with everything. They got an apartment in Wilkes-Barre and our family lived there. I got a job as a cabinet maker and my wife worked in a sewing factory.

Then I decided that I could something better. Denise helped me enroll at Wilkes College, where I took evening classes. I got a degree and then got a job as an electrical engineer in 1980. One day before I graduated, I got a job offer from a company in Long Island, the Harris Company in Syosset as an electrical field engineer.

**And then, eventually, you moved to Annapolis.**

I moved to Annapolis in 1988 after working eight years for Harris. They were forced to close their factory after losing a big contract. I then worked for ARINC.

**Are you retired now?**

I worked there for 18 years. In 2006 they laid me off. After 10 months I found a job with another company and I work for MedAssurant. It's a new company with 1500 employees and specializes in health care.

**I want to thank you very much for our conversation this afternoon. When I finish the transcript I will send it to you. I will need your address.**

My address is:

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